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Dr. Boone and the Creation of the Medicine Ball Cabinet

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By **André B. Sobociński, historian, Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery**



President Herbert Hoover and "The Medicine Cabinet" playing his namesake game, "Hoover Ball." (1933) (Photo courtesy of the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library and Museum)

The president's cabinet is convening this morning, but you will not find them in any boardroom or oval office. This is 1929 and the president is on the south lawn of the [White House](#) immersed in a new morning ritual that the press has dubbed "Hoover Ball." Starched shirts and polished shoes have been replaced with athletic sweaters and well-worn sneakers in this "Medicine Ball Cabinet" as [Herbert Hoover](#) and his close confidants fling an eight-pound leather ball over a nine-foot net under the watchful eye of Dr. Joel Boone, of the [U.S. Navy](#).

Dr. Joel Boone is a legendary figure in Navy Medicine. A [Medal of Honor](#) recipient noted for

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heroics in France and Haiti, he is also credited for adapting helo-decks on Navy hospital ships, reforming health and sanitary conditions in U.S. coal-mines, and serving as the namesake of a Navy [clinic](#) in Little River, Va. In the 1920s and 30s, Boone was seen by many as the consummate, and perceptively perennial, practitioner of White House medicine. He first earned his keep as the assistant [White House](#) physician to Presidents Warren G. Harding and Calvin Coolidge, and then primary physician to Herbert Hoover.

In 1928, when President-elect Herbert Hoover and his wife Louise traveled to South America on a goodwill tour to outline U.S. economic and trade policies, Coolidge sent Dr. Boone to accompany the Hoovers on their return voyage from Montevideo aboard [USS Utah](#). It was aboard this battleship that Boone first noted the president-elect's sedentary lifestyle. Boone convinced Hoover to start throwing a medicine ball around for a few minutes each day. Other members of Hoover's party soon joined in this daily pectoral play. In his unpublished memoir, Boone recalled that "it was just passing the ball in a circle, one to the other. Then, having been acquainted with deck tennis in my earlier days cruising long distances aboard ship... I conceived, in a limited space, using the medicine ball to play a modified game of tennis, as it were, . . . throwing it with our hands across the net, which was kept high, with players on the deck."¹

On March 10, 1929, six days after Hoover's inauguration, Boone conducted a physical examination on the new president noting that the 54-year-old man's health was good except that he suffered from dyspnea, carried too much *avoir du poix* around the abdomen, and his pulse was not as strong as expected.² Boone reviewed the results with Hoover in considerable detail, outlined a special diet to keep his weight down, and advised him on developing a regular exercise routine.³

With curiosity about the president's health abound, reporters pestered Dr. Boone on how he was planning to keep the weighty leader in shape. Boone may have erred when he responded that he was "open to suggestions." Hosts of concerned citizens soon flooded Boone with their own recipes for good health while health and fitness entrepreneurs championed their newest (and suspect) advances in fitness technology.⁴ In the end, Boone retreated from the armies of opinions and dubious technologies and settled on his own method of fitness—the medicine ball.⁵

Dr. Boone proceeded to plan the morning routine of a medicine ball toss. He marked out a rectangular court for a tennis net on the south lawn of the [White House](#), near the fountain. The game would be held at 7:15 every morning, regardless of weather, and open to the president's advisers and associates.⁶

Newspapers started taking notice of this ritual and calling its participants "The Medicine Ball Cabinet." Richard Oulahan of *The New York Times*, observed that "Surgeon Boone of the navy whose specialty is the health of Presidents, is a member of the medicine ball cabinet—in fact their liveliest of all its members, who sets the pace for this strenuous pastime in the



President Herbert Hoover playing his namesake game, "Hoover Ball." (Winter 1933) (Photo courtesy of the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library and Museum)

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backyard of the White House—and he keeps watch to curb any tendency of Mr. Hoover to over-exert himself. From all accounts this daily brief period devoted to tossing the ball back and forth has been very beneficial to the President.”⁷



The “Medicine Ball Cabinet.” A group shot of President Hoover’s Medicine Ball Cabinet. Dr. Boone can be seen seated on the bottom right. (Winter 1933) (Photo courtesy of the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library and Museum)

When his term ended 1933, Hoover distributed autographed medicine balls to his trusted advisors as keepsakes of their time in office.⁸ One wonders if Mr. Hoover hoped these simple exercise tools would overshadow a legacy that included the “Crash of ‘29” and the notorious “Hoovervilles.” Certainly, as a symbol of exercise and wellness, the medicine ball should not be tossed aside. Hoover went on to enjoy the longest retirement of any U.S. president, dying on Oct. 20, 1964 at the age of 90. His long life may have been the result of successively coping with stress, a longtime passion for fishing, or maybe, thanks in part to an innovative Navy man named Boone, and a little game called “Hoover Ball.”

Footnotes

1. *Joel Boone Papers—Memoirs*, Library of Congress, Washington, DC (XXI-1181)

2. In his book *The White House Physician*, Dr. Deppisch credits Dr. Boone with institutionalizing the White House Medical Unit. Before Boone’s tenure as Hoover’s primary physician, the White House Medical Unit was but one individual who had access to a storage closet for medical supplies. Boone doubled the staff and established an examining room and physician’s office, for the “medical team.” (Deppisch, Ludwig. *The White House Physician: A History from Washington to George W. Bush*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company. 2007. p76) This physical marked the first time Hoover had his blood pressure take before in his life. Despite this overdue test, the president’s blood pressure was a normal 120/70. *Memoirs*. (XXII-51-54).

3. Ibid. (XXII-53-54)

4. Ibid. (XXII-57a). The Sanitary Equipment Company of Cleveland, OH, offered to install their "Health Horse" in the White House. C.U. Widner of Upland, CA, submitted information on a device called the "Simplex Appliance Adjuster," which "if used daily mornings and evenings will absolutely prevent any and all diseases." Dr. L.S. Szunkowski of Chicago, IL, boasted his "Vibrall Chair" which vibrated 300-times a minute and promised to give the sitter a sensation of riding horseback!

5. By the time Boone became Hoover's physician, the medicine ball had been in the United States for over fifty years and commonly used by athletes and non-athletes alike to stay in shape and restore health.

Although the medicine ball had been around for centuries and may have originated in Persia, physical educational instructor Robert J. Roberts of Boston, MA, is credited for its name and introduction in the United States in 1876. In an article entitled the "Development of the Medicine Ball," Roberts wrote "I had read about...a certain king who was half sick from eating too much and [from] neglect of exercise. His physician told him he could be cured if he would eat only certain kinds of food, and throw around a ball that the physician would give him to use daily, which was filled with [the] same marvelous drugs whose medicinal properties would, when the king had exercised vigorously enough to bring a free visible perspiration, enter his body through his pores, and cure him." Roberts, Robert J. *Development of the Medicine Ball. American Gymnasia*. Am. Gymnasia Company: Boston, MA. Vol I. 1905. p 248.

6. The original "Hoover Ball Cabinet included Postmaster General Walles Brown, Secretary of Agriculture Arthur Hyde, Lawrence Richey, William D. Mitchell, William (Bill) Hard, Justice Harlan Stone, and journalist Mark Sullivan. Throughout Hoover's entire term in office, the morning medicine ball toss was interrupted only once: after the death of the Secretary of Secretary of War James W. Good. Ibid. (XXII-57)

7. Oulahan, Richard V. "Observations from the Times Watch-Towers." *The New York Times*. June 23, 1929. pE1.

8. "16 Medicine Balls Bought By Hoover for Souvenirs." *The Hartford Courant*. Feb 8, 1933. p2.

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